



US006807892B2

(12) **United States Patent**
Biegelsen et al.

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 6,807,892 B2**
(45) **Date of Patent:** **Oct. 26, 2004**

(54) **PNEUMATIC ACTUATOR WITH ELASTOMERIC MEMBRANE AND LOW-POWER ELECTROSTATIC FLAP VALVE ARRANGEMENT**

(75) Inventors: **David K. Biegelsen**, Portola Valley, CA (US); **Warren B. Jackson**, San Francisco, CA (US); **Lars-Erik Swartz**, Sunnyvale, CA (US); **Andrew A. Berlin**, San Jose, CA (US); **Patrick C. Cheung**, Castro Valley, CA (US)

(73) Assignee: **Xerox Corporation**, Stamford, CT (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 58 days.

(21) Appl. No.: **10/335,595**

(22) Filed: **Dec. 30, 2002**

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

US 2004/0124384 A1 Jul. 1, 2004

(51) **Int. Cl.**⁷ **F15B 11/08**

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **91/459**; 91/454

(58) **Field of Search** 91/454, 459; 92/90, 92/98 R

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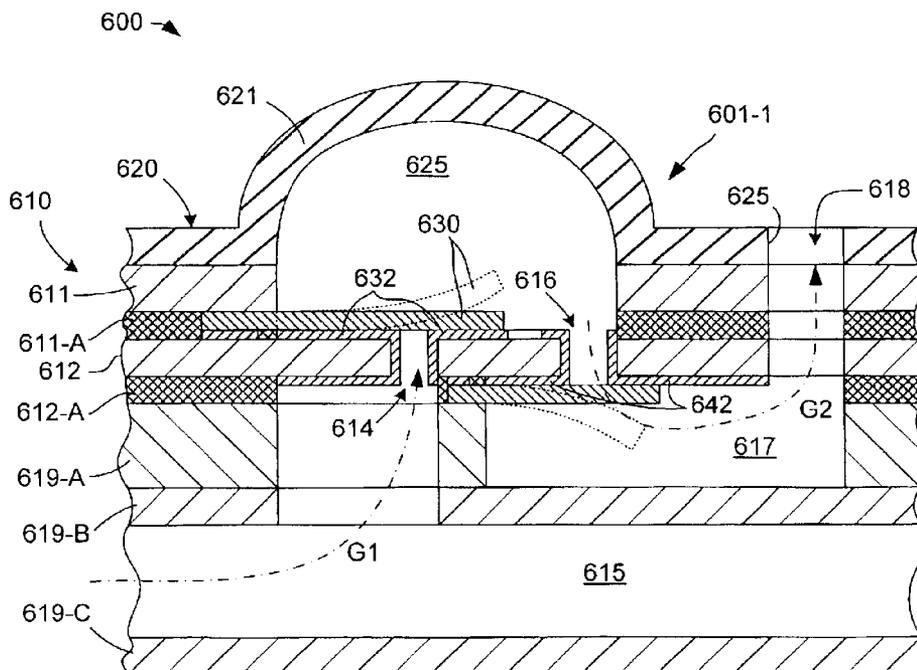
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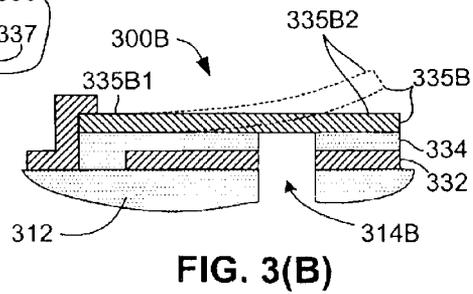
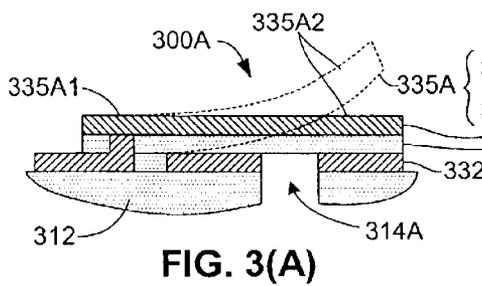
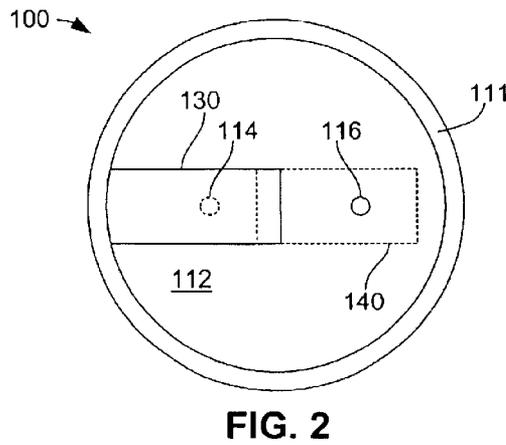
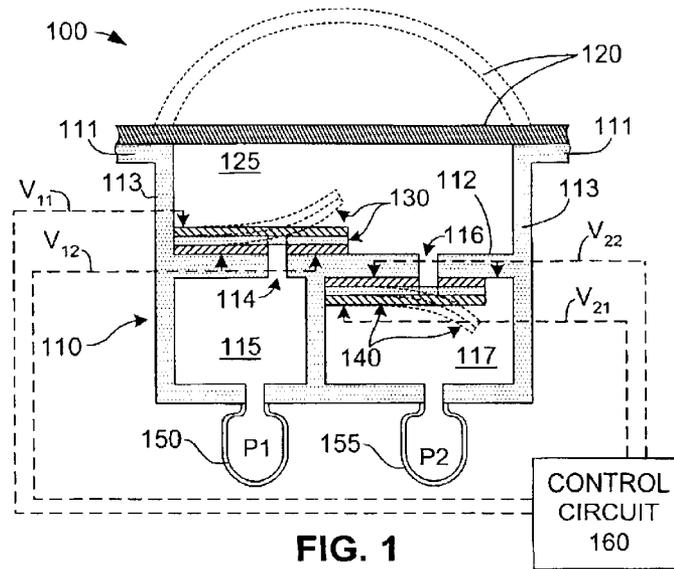
Primary Examiner—Edward K. Look
Assistant Examiner—Michael Leslie
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm*—Bever, Hoffman & Harms, LLP; Patrick T. Bever

(57) **ABSTRACT**

An actuator including a pneumatically distended elastomer membrane that is pressurized and depressurized using electrostatically actuated flap valves laminated onto a printed circuit board. The flap valves close only at zero pressure gradients and flows so that elevated closing and hold-off pressures are achieved. Fluid expelled from the elastomer membranes during collapse are vented through a wall of the actuator. An air jet object mover utilizes an array of the pneumatic actuators as valves to open and close air jet vents. A fiber optic micro-switch utilizes pneumatic actuators to position a mirror.

21 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets





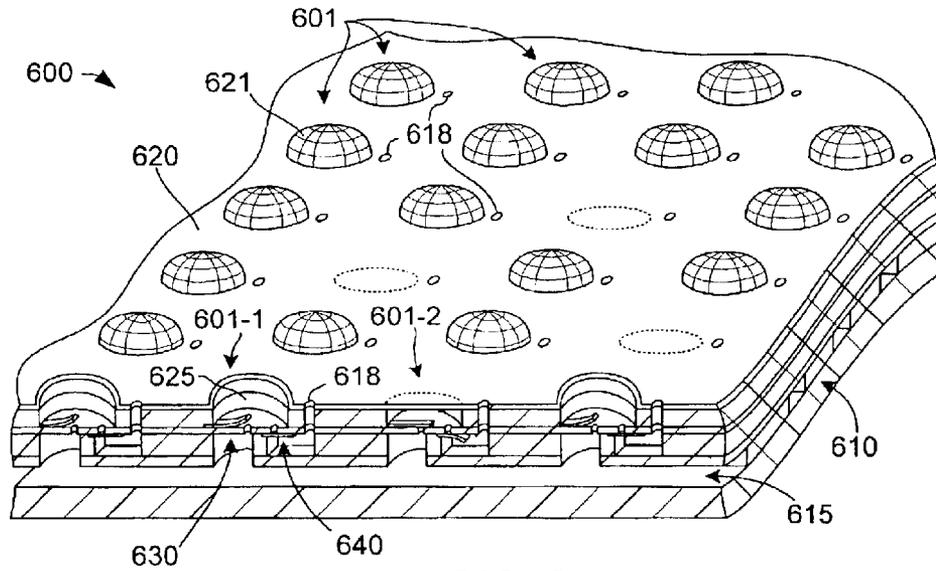


FIG. 6

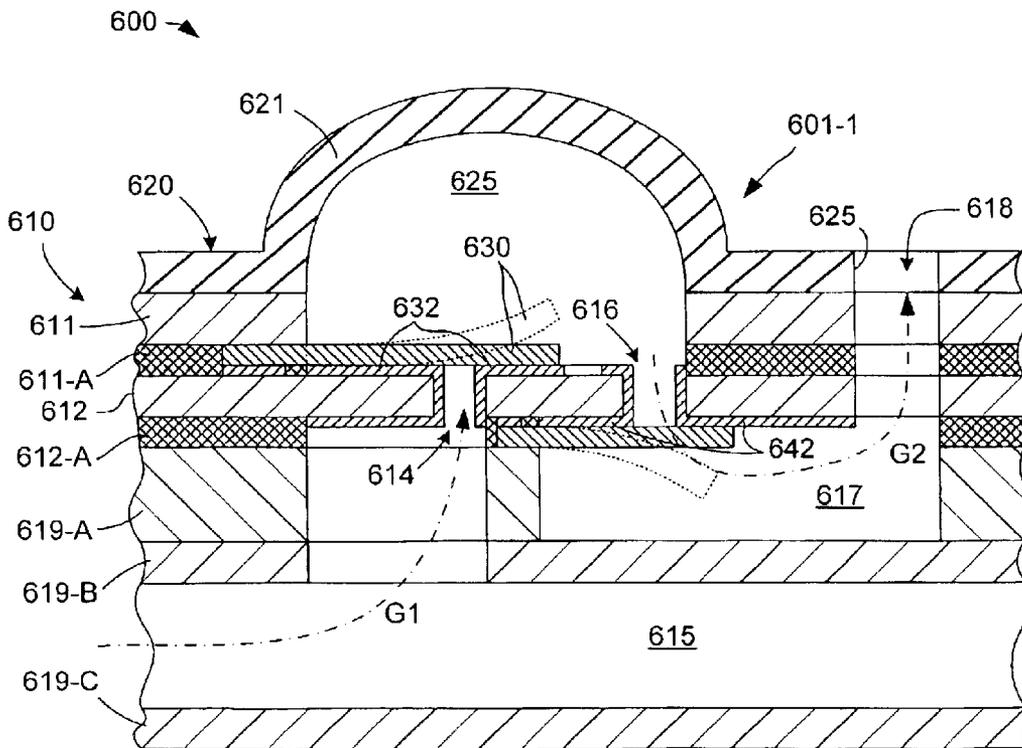


FIG. 7

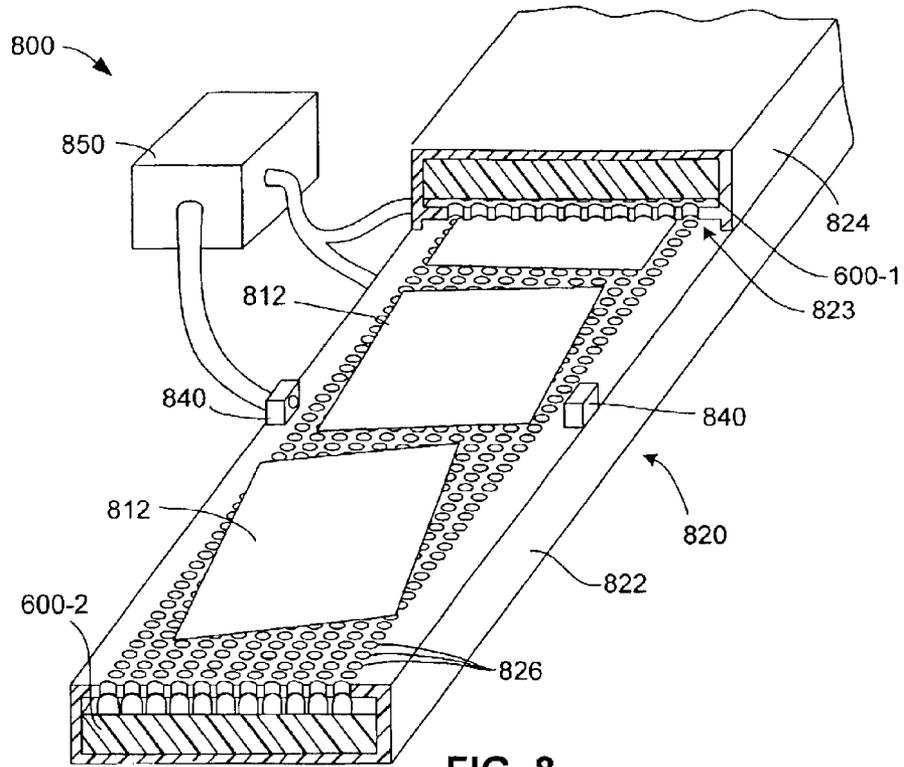


FIG. 8

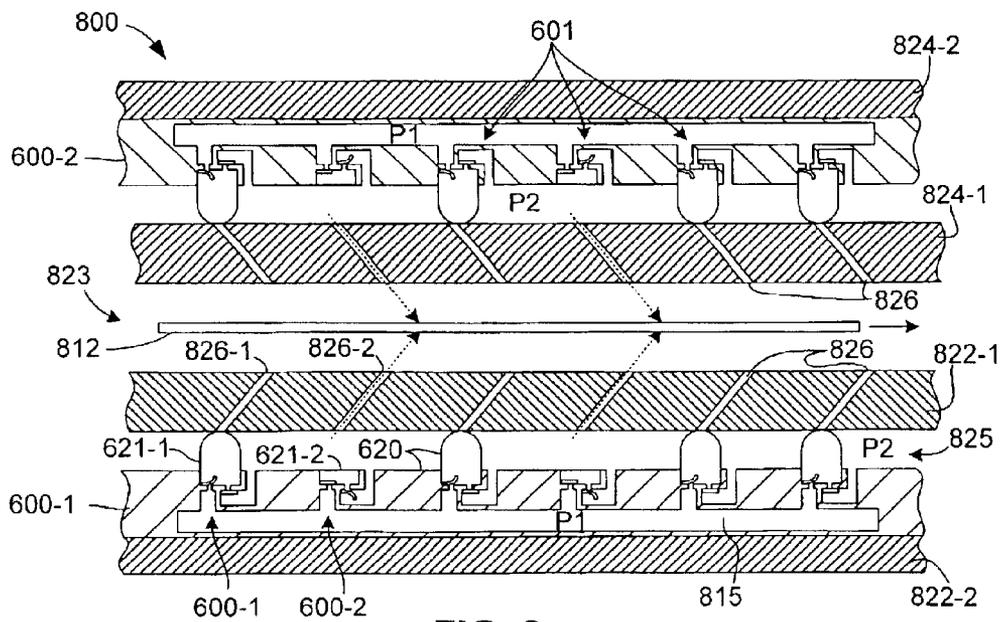


FIG. 9

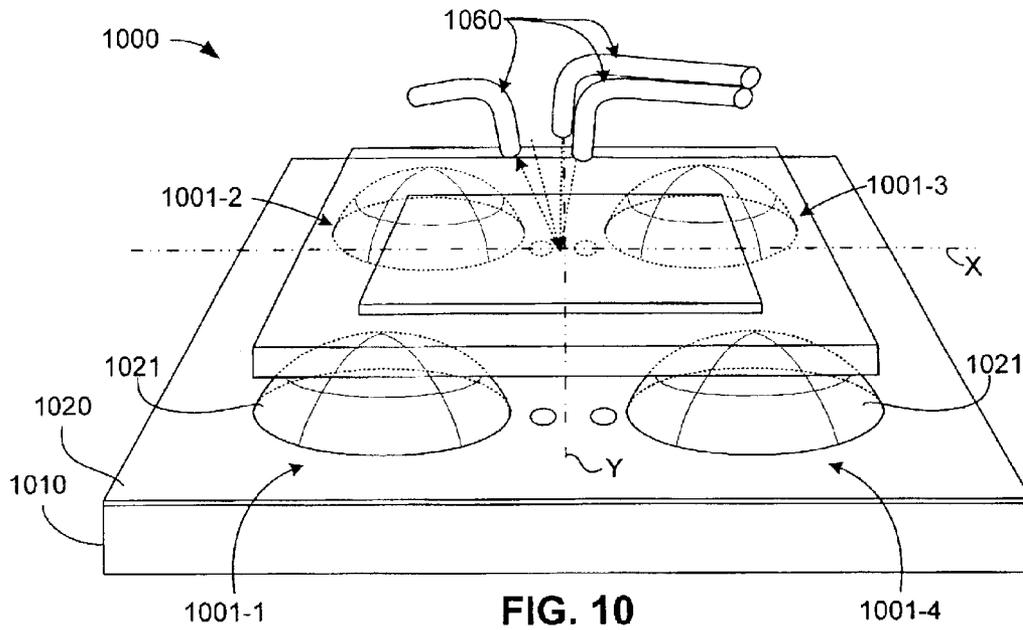


FIG. 10

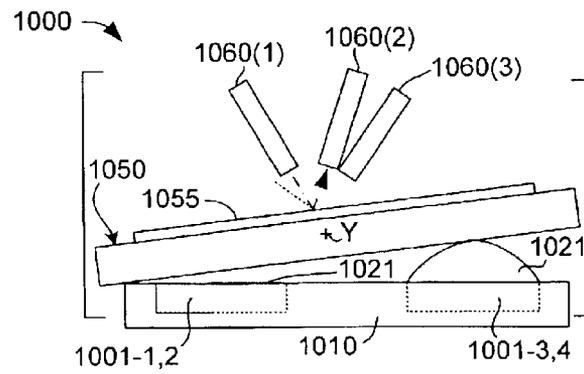


FIG. 11(A)

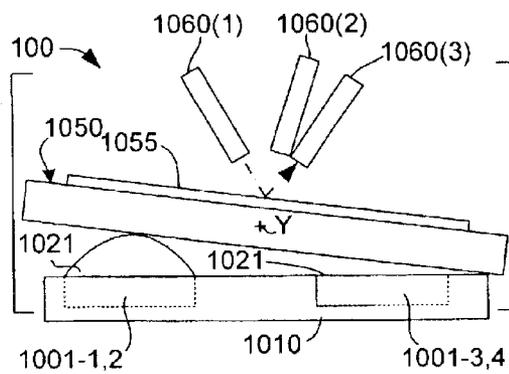


FIG. 11(B)

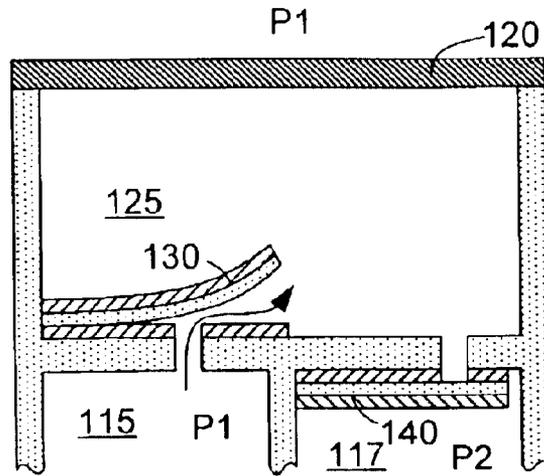


FIG. 12(A)

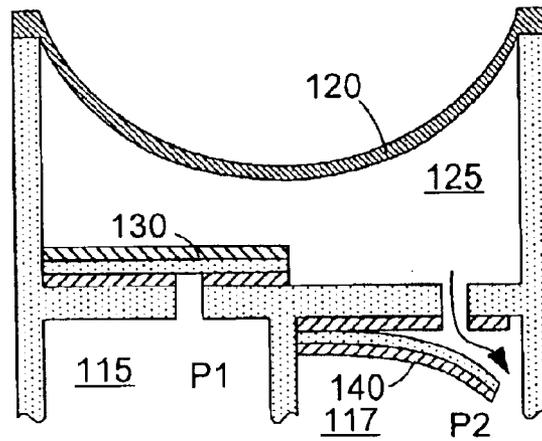


FIG. 12(B)

**PNEUMATIC ACTUATOR WITH
ELASTOMERIC MEMBRANE AND LOW-
POWER ELECTROSTATIC FLAP VALVE
ARRANGEMENT**

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to microdevices, and more particularly to pneumatic actuators and micro-valves.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Microdevices, such as microfluidic control devices and micromachines, are used in a wide variety of modern devices. Currently, microdevices are used in automobiles, medical instrumentation, or process control applications, and in conjunction with appropriate sensors can provide accurate determinations of pressure, temperature, acceleration, gas concentration, and many other physical or chemical states. Microfluidic control devices include micro-valves for handling gases or liquids, flow gauges, and ink jet nozzles, while micromachines include micro-actuators, movable micro-mirror systems, or even tactile moving assemblies.

Large arrays of micro-valves have particular utility in conjunction with air jet paper transport systems or other material processing systems that must precisely control position and velocity of paper or other objects moving through the system. Commonly, material processing systems control object movement by physically engaging the object with a separate object drive mechanism that moves the object at a predetermined velocity along a predetermined path. For example, gear driven ratchets, rollers, hooks, or conveyors are widely employed to move objects as diverse as paper, semiconductors, plastics, or steel by mechanically engaging the objects, and moving the engaged objects along a desired path at a fixed velocity. While commonplace, mechanical or frictional engagement of objects does have a disadvantage of requiring direct physical contact with an object. In contrast to mechanical or frictional transport systems, object drive mechanisms based on various fluid support techniques have long been employed to move delicate objects without requiring solid mechanical contact. For example, instead of using conventional belts, conveyors or rollers, paper moving through xerographic copier systems can be supported on a laminar air flow, or uplifted and moved by directed air jets. This form of fluid support is particularly advantageous, for example, when sheets of paper carrying unfixed toner images must be moved between a photoconductive drum and a fusing station where the toner image is fixed.

One type of micro-valve used in air jet systems is an electrostatic flap valve, which controls the flow of air passing through a port (orifice) formed in a pressure wall separating a high pressure air source and a paper transport passage. Each electrostatic flap valve typically includes a fixed electrode mounted on the downstream surface of the pressure wall surrounding the port, and a flap member including a flexible electrode that is attached at one end to the pressure wall. Flow through the flap valve is controlled by applying a suitable potential to the fixed and flexible electrodes. To open the flap, thereby allowing fluid to flow from the high-pressure source to the transport passage through the orifice, the potential is removed (turned off), allowing the pressure differential to push the flap open. To subsequently close the flap, the potential is applied (turned on), thereby causing electrostatic attraction between the

fixed and flexible electrodes to pull the flap against the pressure wall to close the orifice. One advantage of electrostatic flap valves is that significant power is expended only during valve opening or closing. That is, when flap valves are in an open state or in a closed state, no current flows to maintain either state. Only displacement current flows during valve state transition between the opened and closed states.

A problem with the use of electrostatic flap valves to control fluid flow between high and low pressure regions is that a large force, and therefore a high voltage potential, is required to close the flap against the flow passing through the orifice between the high and low pressure regions. Once the flap is closed, the fixed and flexible electrodes are in very close proximity, and the voltage potential needed to maintain the closed state is relatively small, essentially because the electrostatic force is inversely proportional to the square of the distance between electrodes. However, when the flap is opened, the fixed and flexible electrodes are far apart, and a substantially larger voltage potential is needed to pull the flap closed. Further, the fluid flowing through the orifice applies a force against the flap that further increases the needed voltage potential, and if large enough, this force can prevent closure even when extremely high voltages are used. These voltages are ultimately limited by breakdown mechanisms between the fixed and flexible electrodes. Accordingly, when electrostatic flap valves are utilized in this manner, the pressure gradient across the high and low-pressure regions is limited by the available voltage potential to allow closure of the flap.

Microdevice actuators often include micromachined monocrystalline structures or piezoelectric devices to perform a desired operation, such as to position a micro-mirror in a fiber-optic micro-switch. However, both monocrystalline structures and piezoelectric devices are relatively expensive to produce, and require relatively high voltage sources to produce required positioning forces.

What is needed is a cost effective pneumatic valve and a cost effective pneumatic actuator that can be driven using low voltages and low power. What is also needed is an inexpensive pneumatic valve for controlling high-pressure fluid flows.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is directed to a low-cost pneumatic actuator that facilitates both low-power micro-valve and low-power micro-actuator functions by utilizing a pair of electrostatic flap valves to control the flow of a fluid into an expandable chamber such that the electrostatic flap valves are only closed under equilibrium (i.e., zero flow) conditions or approximate thereto (e.g., zero to 10% of the full flow rate) such that minimal force is needed to close the valves.

The pneumatic actuator includes a housing defining a cavity, an elastomeric membrane (e.g., a silicone film) mounted over the cavity to form an expandable chamber, and a pair of electrostatic flap valves for controlling fluid flow into and out of the expandable chamber. According to an aspect of the present invention, a first electrostatic flap valve is mounted inside the expandable chamber such that it is positioned to selectively block fluid flow into the chamber through a first orifice, and a second electrostatic flap valve is mounted outside the expandable chamber such that it is positioned to selectively block fluid flow out of the chamber through a second orifice. In one embodiment, the first orifice is connected to a high-pressure source, and the second orifice is connected to a low-pressure source (e.g., to the

external atmosphere through a vent hole formed in an upper wall of the housing).

During operation, the elastomeric membrane is distended (stretched) by releasing the first electrostatic flap valve (i.e., causing an associated control circuit to turn off the control signals transmitted to the first flap valve) while maintaining the second electrostatic flap valve in a closed position, thereby allowing the high pressure gradient across the first orifice to push the first flap valve open. When the pressure gradient across the electrostatic membrane is balanced by the elastic restoring force of the distended membrane, flow into the cavity stops. It then requires negligible electrostatic force to close the first flap valve. Conversely, the elastomeric membrane is subsequently collapsed by releasing the second electrostatic flap valve while maintaining the first electrostatic flap valve in a closed position, thereby allowing the high pressure inside the expandable chamber to escape through the second orifice. According to the present invention, the first electrostatic flap valve is only actuated to block the first orifice when an internal pressure of the expandable chamber is approximately equal to the pressure supplied by the high pressure source, and the second electrostatic flap valve is only actuated to block the second orifice when the internal pressure of the expandable chamber is approximately equal to the exhaust pressure (for example, atmospheric pressure). As described above, conventional arrangements require at least one valve to close against the flow of gas through the orifice, which requires a voltage much higher than that needed to hold off the static pressure. Unlike these conventional arrangements, neither flap valve of the pneumatic actuator is required to close against the flow of fluid. Accordingly, the present invention provides a mechanism for repeatedly expanding and contracting an expandable chamber that requires voltages sufficient only to hold off the pressure gradient. Alternatively, the same voltage may be used as for conventional arrangements, but much higher pressures can be utilized.

According to an embodiment of the present invention, an array of pneumatic actuators are formed on a housing that is fabricated using substantially conventional printed circuit board fabrication techniques. By utilizing the conventional printed circuit board fabrication techniques to construct the housing, the manufacturing costs associated with the production and electronic driving of the pneumatic actuator array are significantly lower than the costs associated with the production of conventional micro-actuator arrays.

According to another embodiment of the present invention, the pneumatic actuator array of the present invention is utilized as a fluid control valve array in which the distendable portions of the elastomeric membrane are positioned to selectively block, for example, air jet ports in an air jet paper (or other object) transport system. This arrangement overcomes problems associated with conventional air jet arrays that utilize electrostatic flap valves to directly open and close associated air jets. In particular, unlike conventional air jets in which the flap valve must close against the flow of air, the electrostatic flap valves of each pneumatic actuator open and close when pressure inside the distended membrane is equalized. Therefore, the limitation on conventional air jet flows, which is limited by the ability of the flap valves to close off through their flow fields, is eliminated in paper handling systems that incorporate the pneumatic actuators of the present invention. Accordingly, a much higher paper transport air pressure may be provided than that usable in conventional air jet paper handling systems, which facilitates improved control over paper movement through the system.

According to yet another embodiment of the present invention, the pneumatic actuator of the present invention is utilized as a micromachine to control the position or orientation of an object, such as a micro-mirror structure in a fiber-optic micro-switch, thereby providing a low cost, low voltage, low-power alternative to conventional actuators.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

These and other features, aspects and advantages of the present invention will become better understood with regard to the following description, appended claims, and accompanying drawings, where:

FIG. 1 is a cross-sectional side view showing a pneumatic actuator according to a simplified embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a top view showing a portion of the pneumatic actuator of FIG. 1;

FIGS. 3(A) and 3(B) are cross-sectional side views showing alternative electrostatic flap valve arrangements that can be utilized in the pneumatic actuator of FIG. 1;

FIG. 4(A) is a timing diagram depicting pressure changes inside an expandable chamber of the pneumatic actuator of FIG. 1 during a first operational example;

FIGS. 4(B) and 4(C) are timing diagrams depicting operating voltages applied to the electrostatic flap valves during the first operational example;

FIGS. 5(A) through 5(D) are partial cross-sectional side views showing the pneumatic actuator of FIG. 1 during the first operational example associated with FIGS. 4(A) through 4(C);

FIG. 6 is a perspective view showing a portion of a pneumatic actuator array according to another embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 7 is a cross-sectional side view showing an actuator of the pneumatic actuator array of FIG. 6 in additional detail;

FIG. 8 is a cut-away perspective view showing a paper handling system for accurately moving air jet supported papers at high speeds using valve arrays formed in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional side view showing a section of the paper handling system of FIG. 8;

FIG. 10 is an isometric perspective view showing a fiber-optics micro-switch assembly according to another embodiment of the present invention;

FIGS. 11(A) and 11(B) are simplified front elevation views showing opposing switch states of the micro-switch assembly of FIG. 10; and

FIGS. 12(A) and 12(B) are partial cross-sectional side views showing a pneumatic actuator according to another embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIGS. 1 and 2 are cross-sectional side and simplified top views, respectively, showing a pneumatic actuator 100 according to an embodiment of the present invention. As indicated in FIG. 1, pneumatic actuator 100 generally includes a housing 110 and elastomeric membrane 120 that form an expandable chamber 125 that is selectively altered (i.e., expanded into the distended condition indicated by dashed lines, or contracted into the flattened condition depicted by shading and solid lines) by selectively opening and closing first and second electrostatic flap valves 130 and 140.

Housing 110 includes a rigid upper wall 111, a rigid lower wall 112, and one or more rigid side walls 113 that form a

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cavity having an open end (i.e., defined by an opening formed in upper wall **111**). A first orifice **114** and a second orifice **116** are formed through lower (pressure) wall **112**. First orifice **114** is formed between expandable chamber **125** and a first (e.g., high) pressure source **150** by way of a first conduit (plenum) **115**. Similarly, second orifice **116** is formed between expandable chamber **125** and a second (e.g., low) pressure source **155** by way of a second conduit **117**. As set forth in detail below, housing **110** is preferably formed using low cost printed circuit board technologies, but can also be constructed using a variety of machining or micromachining techniques, including those associated with conventional integrated circuit fabrication. For example, chemical etching, electron beam lithography, photolithography, or other standard integrated circuit batch processing technologies can be used to define necessary air conduits, control or circuitry conduits, holes, orifices, and openings. Alternatively, injection molding, high precision numerically controlled machines, or stereo lithography can be employed for low cost batch construction of housing **110**. Materials used in construction may include plastics, metals, glasses, or ceramics. In one possible embodiment, plastics, epoxies, glass, silicon, polysilicon, silicon nitride, silicon, silicon oxide, oxynitride, plastics or aluminum, or any other available material suitable for lithographic processing or laser, chemical or mechanical patterning and lamination can be used to define the various structures of housing **110**.

Elastomeric membrane **120** is formed on an upper surface of upper wall **111**, and includes a distendable portion **121** extending over the cavity formed in housing **110** such that distendable portion **121** forms expandable chamber **125** with side wall **113** and lower wall **112**. Elastomeric membrane **120** is formed, for example, by depositing or laminating a silicone film in accordance with known techniques. In other embodiments, rubberized silicone or other elastomeric materials that are expandable in the manner described herein may be used.

First electrostatic flap valve **130** and second electrostatic flap valve **140** are controlled by a control circuit **160**, which generates control signals having appropriate timing and amplitude to selectively open and close orifices **114** and **116**, respectively. First electrostatic flap valve **130** is positioned to control fluid flow through first orifice **114**, and second electrostatic flap valve **140** is positioned to control fluid flow through second orifice **116**. Control circuit **160** selectively asserts/de-asserts one or more first control signals (e.g., V_{11} and V_{12}) to control the operation (i.e., open or close condition) of first electrostatic flap valve **130**, and one or more second control signals (e.g., V_{21} and V_{22}) to control the operation of second electrostatic flap valve **140** according to the operation described below.

FIGS. **3(A)** and **3(B)** are cross sectional side views showing alternative electrostatic flap valves **300A** and **300B** that can be utilized to implement flap valves **130** and **140** of pneumatic actuator **100**.

Referring to FIG. **3(A)**, electrostatic flap valve **300A** includes a lower electrode **332** (e.g., copper) that is formed on a non-conductive wall **312**, and a flexible flap **335A** including a lower, non-conductive film **336** (e.g., Mylar) and an upper conductive thin film **337** (e.g., aluminum). Lower electrode **332** is fixedly formed on a wall **312**, and an orifice **314A** is formed through both wall **312** and lower electrode **332**. A fixed end **335A1** of flap **335A** is adhered or otherwise attached to wall **312** either directly or through an intervening structure (e.g., a portion of lower electrode **332**). A free end **335A2** of flap **335A** extends over orifice **314A** in a manner similar to that shown in FIG. **2**. When a suitable potential is

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applied across fixed electrode **332** and upper conductive thin film **337**, flexible flap **335A** is held against wall **312** by electrostatic force, thereby blocking orifice **314A**. Conversely, when the potential is removed, flexible flap **335A** is free to bend away from wall **312**, as indicated in dashed lines. Electrostatic flap valves of the type shown in FIG. **3(A)** are described in additional detail, for example, in "AirJet paper mover: An example of meso-scale MEMS", David Biegelsen et al., Proceedings of SPIE, Vol. 4176, pp. 122-129 (2000), which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

Referring to FIG. **3(B)**, similar to electrostatic flap valve **300A** (FIG. **3(A)**), electrostatic flap valve **300B** includes lower electrode **332** formed on wall **312**. However, electrostatic flap valve **300B** is distinguished from electrostatic flap valve **300A** in that a fixed non-conductive film **334** is formed on lower electrode **332**, and a flexible flap **335A** is entirely formed using a conductive thin film (e.g., aluminum). Orifice **314B** is formed through wall **312**, lower electrode **332**, and non-conductive film **334**. A fixed end **335B1** of flap **335B** is attached to wall **312**, and a free end **335B2** of flap **335B** extends over orifice **314B** in a manner similar to that described above. Flap **335B** is controlled in a manner similar to that described above with reference to flap **335A**. Electrostatic flap valves of the type shown in FIG. **3(B)** are described in additional detail, for example, in co-owned U.S. Pat. No. 6,120,002, David Biegelsen et al., which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

Referring again to FIG. **1**, according to a first aspect of the present invention, first electrostatic flap valve **130** is formed inside expandable chamber **125**, and second electrostatic flap valve **140** is formed outside of expandable chamber **125**. In particular, first electrostatic flap valve **130** is mounted on an inside surface of lower wall **112** such that it opens into expandable chamber **125**, and second electrostatic flap valve **140** is mounted on an outside surface of lower wall **112** such that it opens away from expandable chamber **125**. Accordingly, as set forth in detail below, first electrostatic flap valve **130** is actuated to block orifice **114** only when an internal pressure of expandable chamber **125** is equal to the pressure supplied by first pressure source **150**, and second electrostatic flap valve **140** is actuated to block orifice **116** only when the internal pressure of expandable chamber **125** is equal to the pressure supplied by second pressure source **155**. (The actuation voltage transitions can, in fact, be asserted at any time, but the valves switch only when the flows drop to levels low enough to allow the electrostatic forces to exceed the flap opening forces. In typical operation delay times, determined by experiment or simulation, are inserted between opening of one valve of a pair and closure of the next. It is also possible to integrate pressure sensing or flow means within each chamber **125** to feedback information to the controller to enable switching time determination.) As described above, conventional arrangements require at least one valve to close against the flow of gas through the orifice, which requires a significant amount of power. Unlike these conventional arrangements, neither first electrostatic flap valve **130** nor second electrostatic flap valve **140** is required to close against the flow of fluid through orifices **114** and **116**, respectively. Accordingly, the present invention provides a mechanism for repeatedly expanding and contracting expandable chamber **125** that requires significantly less operating voltage and power than conventional arrangements.

FIGS. **4(A)** through **4(C)** and **5(A)** through **5(D)** are diagrams illustrating the operation of pneumatic actuator **100** in additional detail. FIG. **4(A)** is a timing diagram

depicting the pressure inside expandable chamber 125 according to an operational example. FIGS. 4(B) and 4(C) are timing diagrams depicting operating voltages applied to first electrostatic flap valve 130 and second electrostatic flap valve 140 during the operational example of FIG. 4(A). FIGS. 5(A) through 5(D) are partial cross-sectional side views showing pneumatic actuator 100 during the operational example associated with FIGS. 4(A) through 4(C).

Referring to FIG. 4(A), the present example begins at a time t_0 , when the pressure P_{C125} inside chamber 125 is substantially equal to the lower pressure source 155 (i.e., pressure P_2). At this point elastomeric membrane 120 is substantially deflated (flat, e.g., as depicted in solid lines in FIG. 1, and in dashed lines in FIG. 5(A)). Note that the "flatness" of membrane 120 assumes the atmospheric pressure outside membrane 120 is substantially equal to pressure P_2 . As indicated in FIG. 4(B), due to the high pressure gradient across orifice 114, the control voltage potential $V_{11}-V_{12}$ applied across electrostatic flap valve 130 must be maintained at a sufficiently high value (i.e., V_{CLOSE}) to prevent its flap from bending inward. Conversely, as indicated in FIG. 4(C), because the pressure gradient across orifice 116 is zero when P_{C125} is equal to P_2 , the control voltage potential $V_{21}-V_{22}$ applied across electrostatic flap valve 140 can be either zero (V_{OPEN}) or at a high value (V_{CLOSE}), as indicated by the "X" located between times t_0 and t_1 . Note that in one embodiment, the flexible conductor of each electrostatic flap valve is connected to a fixed voltage source (e.g., V_{11} and V_{21} equal zero Volts), and the control voltage potential of each electrostatic flap valve is determined by the control voltages V_{12} and V_{22} that are transmitted to the fixed electrode associated with electrostatic flap valve.

Referring to FIG. 4(B), at time t_1 the control signal supplied to electrostatic flap valve 130 (i.e., voltage potential $V_{11}-V_{12}$) is turned off (i.e., switched from V_{CLOSE} to V_{OPEN}). When the electrostatic force holding electrostatic flap valve 130 is turned off, the force caused by the pressure gradient across orifice 114 pushes the flap open, as indicated in FIG. 5(A), causing a fluid flow G1 (e.g., air or another electrically insulating gas or liquid) into chamber 125. As indicated in FIG. 4(A), inflow of fluid into chamber 125 causes pressure P_{C125} to increase from P_2 (at time t_1) to P_1 (at time t_2). As indicated in FIG. 5(A), the increasing chamber pressure P_{C125} causes elastomeric membrane 120 to distend (expand). Note also that the increasing chamber pressure P_{C125} also creates a gradual increasing force F1 on electrostatic flap valve 140 (i.e., through orifice 116). Accordingly, as indicated in FIG. 4(C), the control signal supplied to electrostatic flap valve 140 (i.e., voltage potential $V_{21}-V_{22}$) must be turned on (i.e., V_{OPEN}) during time t_1 to time t_2 to prevent this flap valve from opening.

FIG. 5(B) shows pneumatic actuator 100 when the pressure inside expandable chamber 125 reaches equilibrium with first pressure source 150 (i.e., chamber pressure P_{C125} equals pressure P_1 , as indicated in FIG. 4(A)). At time t_2 , elastomeric membrane 120 becomes fully distended (i.e., the outward force caused by chamber pressure P_{C125} is balanced by a resisting force RF_{C125} (i.e., tensile forces produced by the stretched membrane plus external pressure). Also note that the force F1 on electrostatic flap valve 130 during time t_2 to t_3 is maximized, thereby requiring maintenance of the applied control voltage.

According to an aspect of the present invention, the gas flow through orifice 114 at time t_2 ceases (i.e., when chamber pressure P_{C125} equals pressure P_1 ; see FIG. 4(A)) thereby allowing the actuation of electrostatic flap valve 130

using a much lower voltage than if closed against fluid flow. That is, once chamber pressure P_{C125} equalizes, gas flow G1 through orifice 114 (see FIG. 5(A)) ceases and the force F2 applied to the bottom of flap valve 130 drops to zero. Accordingly, as shown in FIG. 4(B), at any point after time t_2 , the voltage potential $V_{11}-V_{12}$ across flap valve 130 is turned on (i.e., increased from V_{OPEN} to V_{CLOSE}), and flap valve 130 is actuated (i.e., closed) using substantially less power than if closed under non-equilibrium conditions. By only closing electrostatic flap valve 130 when chamber pressure P_{C125} is equal to pressure P_1 , a pneumatic actuator is provided that requires very little power.

Subsequently, at a desired time t_3 , the control signal supplied to electrostatic flap valve 140 (i.e., voltage potential $V_{21}-V_{22}$) is turned off (i.e., switched from V_{CLOSE} to V_{OPEN}). When the electrostatic force holding electrostatic flap valve 140 is turned off, the force caused by the pressure gradient across orifice 116 pushes the flap open, as indicated in FIG. 5(C), causing a fluid flow G2 out of chamber 125. As indicated in FIG. 4(A), fluid outflow from chamber 125 causes pressure P_{C125} to decrease from P_1 (at time t_3) to P_2 (at time t_4). As indicated in FIG. 5(C), the decreasing chamber pressure P_{C125} reduces outward pressing force relative to resisting force RF_{C125} , thereby causing elastomeric membrane 120 to begin to shrink. Note that as chamber pressure P_{C125} decreases from P_1 , a gradually increasing force F2 is applied to electrostatic flap valve 130 (i.e., through orifice 114), which remains closed due to the applied control signal.

FIG. 5(D) shows pneumatic actuator 100 after time t_4 when the pressure inside expandable chamber 125 reaches equilibrium with second pressure source 155 (i.e., chamber pressure P_{C125} equals pressure P_2 , as indicated in FIG. 4(A)), and gas flow through orifice 116 ceases. Accordingly, as shown in FIG. 4(C), similar to the operation of electrostatic flap valve 130, electrostatic flap valve 140 can be actuated (closed) after time t_4 using a much lower voltage than if closed against fluid flow.

As indicated in FIGS. 4(A) through 4(C), subsequent operation of pneumatic actuator 100 is then repeated by repeating the application of operating voltages as set forth above. Accordingly, as set forth in the practical examples provided below, the present invention provides a highly efficient pneumatic actuator in which a minimal amount of force is required to actuate electrostatic flap valves 130 and 140.

Note that, in the above example, the gas flow rates G1 and G2 indicated in FIGS. 5(A) and 5(C), along with the forces F1 and F2 indicated in FIGS. 5(B) and 5(D), are determined by the pressure gradient (P_2-P_1) across the respective flap valves, and by the diameters of orifices 114 and 116. Increasing the diameter of orifices 114 and 116 would increase the force F1 and F2, thereby requiring greater potentials for holding the flap valves closed, but would reduce the time constant (e.g., t_2-t_1) required to equalize the pressure in expandable chamber 125. Conversely, reducing the diameters of orifices 114 and 116 decreases the amount of power required to hold electrostatic flap valves 130 and 140 closed, but would increase the time constant required to equalize the pressure in expandable chamber 125. Therefore, those skilled in the art will recognize that an optimal orifice size for a given application will be determined by power or voltage versus performance considerations.

FIG. 6 is a partial perspective view showing a pneumatic actuator array 600 including several pneumatic actuators 601 arranged in accordance with a first practical embodi-

ment of the present invention. Pneumatic actuator array **600** may be used essentially as shown in FIG. **6** as a tactile stimulator, such as a refreshable Braille display wherein the pneumatic actuators **601** form Braille dots that extend and retract to form Braille characters. In other embodiments, pneumatic actuator array **600** may be used as variable data lithographic marking engines. In yet another embodiment, pneumatic actuator array **600** may be used as variable data display device. Moreover, as exemplified by specific embodiments set forth below, pneumatic actuator array **600** may be incorporated into any of various apparatus that utilize pneumatic actuators **601** to perform various micro-valve and micro-actuator functions.

Referring to FIG. **6**, array **600** generally includes a housing **610** that defines several open-topped cavities, and a sheet **620** of elastomeric material (e.g., silicone) that is formed on an upper surface of housing **610**. As indicated by pneumatic actuator **601-1**, each pneumatic actuator **601** includes an expandable chamber **625** formed by a section (elastomeric membrane) **621** of elastomeric sheet **620** located over an associated cavity formed by housing **610**. Each pneumatic actuator **601** also includes a first electrostatic flap valve **630** located inside of expandable chamber **625**, and a second electrostatic flap valve **640** located outside of expandable chamber **625**. As discussed in additional detail below, first electrostatic flap valve **630** is controlled to facilitate fluid flow from first (high) pressure source (not shown) by way of a plenum **615** into expandable chamber **625**, and second electrostatic flap valve **640** is controlled to facilitate fluid flow from expandable chamber **625** to the external atmosphere (i.e., second pressure source) through an exhaust port **618** defined in upper wall **611** (and through a corresponding opening **625** formed in elastomeric sheet **620**). Accordingly, each pneumatic actuator **601** operates essentially as described above with reference to simplified pneumatic actuator **100** to change between a distended state (e.g., as indicated by pneumatic actuator **601-1**) and a contracted (deflated) state (e.g., as indicated by pneumatic actuator **601-2**).

FIG. **7** is an enlarged cross-sectional side view showing a portion of pneumatic actuator array **600** that shows pneumatic actuator **601-1** in additional detail. According to another aspect of the present invention, housing **610** includes an upper plate **611**, a printed circuit board (lower wall) **612** positioned in spaced apart parallel relationship to upper plate **611**, and a series of lower plates **619A**, **619B**, and **619C** that define plenum **615** and other support structures described below. Printed circuit board (PCB) **612** is fabricated using standard methods with an array of holes having diameters in the range of 25 microns to several millimeters or larger, depending upon the desired gas flow impedance versus power/voltage considerations. These holes act as vias both for connecting the lower and upper copper traces, which are used to form fixed electrodes **632** and **642**, as well as for defining orifices **614** and **616**. Next, upper plate **611** (e.g., acrylic) is attached to PCB **612** using a suitable adhesive layer **611-A** such that a fixed end of first electrostatic flap valve **630** is sandwiched between upper plate **611** and PCB **612**, and a free end of first electrostatic flap valve **630** extends over orifice **614**. Similarly, a first lower plate **619A** is attached to PCB **612** using a suitable adhesive layer **612-A** such that a fixed end of second electrostatic flap valve **640** is sandwiched between lower plate **619A** and PCB **612**, and a free end of second electrostatic flap valve **640** extends over orifice **616**. Note that first electrostatic flap valve **630** and second electrostatic flap valve **640** are connected to corresponding conductors

formed on PCB **612**, either at each valve location using the structure shown in FIG. **3(A)**, or in common at sites peripheral to the array using the structure indicated in FIG. **3(B)**. A second lower plate **619B** is then attached to first lower plate **619A** to form an exhaust port **617** that communicates with vent hole **618** formed in upper plate **611**. Note that exhaust port **617** and vent hole **618** communicate through an opening **625** formed in elastomeric sheet **620**. A third lower plate **619C** is then connected below plate **619B** using an intervening brace (not shown) to form plenum **615**. In another embodiment (not shown), exhaust port **617** may be similarly structured to vent through third lower plate **619C**. By utilizing the conventional printed circuit board fabrication techniques to construct housing **610**, the manufacturing costs associated with the production of pneumatic actuator array **600** are significantly lower than the costs associated with the production of conventional arrays.

During operation, in a manner similar to that described above, the various actuators **601** of pneumatic actuator array **600** are selectively expanded and contracted using control signals transmitted on PCB **612** using known techniques. As mentioned above, in some embodiments (e.g., tactile simulators and various control apparatus), each actuator **601** is addressed individually, whereas in other embodiments, actuators **601** are addressed in groups. In yet other embodiments, every actuator of array **600** may be expanded and contracted simultaneously, for example, to lift an object mounted over the actuators.

As mentioned above, in addition to the uses described above, the pneumatic actuators of the present invention may be incorporated into selected apparatus to perform various micro-valve and micromachine functions. Examples of such apparatus will now be described.

FIG. **8** is a cut-away perspective view showing a paper handling system **800** for moving air jet supported papers **812** at high speeds using pneumatic actuators as micro-valves to control the air jets in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention. Similar to conventional air jet systems, paper handling system **800** includes a conveyor **820** that is divided into a lower section **822** and an upper section **824**. For clarity, upper section **824** is cut away to better illustrate paper movement along conveyor **820**. However, it will be appreciated that upper section **824** and lower section **822** are substantially coextensive. Sections **822** and **824** are maintained in spaced apart relationship to define a passage (low pressure region) **823** therebetween, with the passage sized to accommodate the passage of paper **812**. Each section **822** and **824** defines a plurality of air jets (openings) **826** that are selectively controlled in the manner described below to move paper sheets **812** along passage **823**.

In accordance with the present invention, at least some of the adjustable air jets **826** are controlled by corresponding pneumatic actuators to propel paper sheets **812** along passage **823**. In one embodiment, as shown in FIG. **8**, lower section **822** includes a first pneumatic actuator array **600-1**, and upper section **824** includes a second pneumatic actuator array **600-2**. In the disclosed embodiment, first and second pneumatic actuator arrays are similar to array **600**, which is described above with reference to FIG. **6**, with each actuator being positioned opposite to a corresponding air jet **826** in the manner described below with reference to FIG. **9**. In an alternative embodiment, an array including actuators similar to those shown in FIG. **1** may be utilized. Each array **600-1** and **600-2** receives control signals from a control circuit **850**, which utilizes feedback signals from one or more sensors **840** to dynamically support, move, and guide paper sheets **812** along passage **823** according to known control techniques.

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FIG. 9 is a simplified cross-sectional side view showing a portion of paper handling system 800 in additional detail. First pneumatic actuator array 600-1 is mounted between an inside wall 822-1 and an outside wall 822-2 of lower section 822 such that a high pressure region 825 is provided between elastomeric membrane 620 of array 600-1 and inside wall 822-1. Similarly, pneumatic actuator array 600-2 is mounted between an inside wall 824-1 and an outside wall 824-2 of upper section 824. Inside walls 822-1 and 824-1 define air jets 826, which are angled in the manner shown in FIG. 9 to facilitate the movement of sheet 812 along passage 823. Each air jet 826 is controlled by a corresponding actuator 601 such that the air jet 826 is blocked (closed) when the corresponding actuator is distended, and opened when the corresponding actuator is collapsed. For example, referring to the lower portion of FIG. 9, actuator 601-1 is actuated such that membrane section 621-1 is distended to block the inlet of corresponding air jet passage 826-1, thereby preventing the flow of air from high pressure region to passage 823. In contrast, membrane section 621-1 of actuator 601-2 is collapsed and therefore separated from the inlet of corresponding air jet passage 826-2, thereby facilitating the flow of air from high pressure region to passage 823. By selectively controlling actuators 601 of both arrays 600-1 and 600-2 to press portions of elastomeric membrane against inner walls 822-1 and 824-1, air jets 826 can be turned on and off in a pattern known to those familiar with air jet paper movers to facilitate the movement of paper sheet 812 along passage 823.

In accordance with an aspect of the present invention, use of arrays 600-1 and 600-2 to control air jets 826 overcomes a problem associated with conventional air jet arrays that utilize electrostatic flap valves to directly open and close associated air jets. In particular, unlike conventional air jets in which the flap valve must close against the flow of air, the electrostatic flap valves of each actuator 601 open and close when pressure inside the distended membrane is equalized, as set forth in detail above. Therefore, the limitation on conventional air jet flows, which is limited by the ability of the flap valves to close off through their flow fields, is eliminated in paper handling system 800. Accordingly, a much higher air pressure P2 may be provided in high pressure region 825 than that usable in conventional air jet paper handling systems, which facilitates improved control over the movement of sheet 812 through passage 823.

Note that in order for actuators 601 to vent into high pressure region 825, as described above with reference to FIGS. 6 and 7, the valve pressure P1 provided in plenum 815 of each array must be greater than pressure P2 provided in high pressure region 825. As in the previously described embodiments, system response times are set by size of the valve orifices and pressure difference P1-P2.

FIG. 10 is an isometric perspective view showing a pneumatic fiber-optics micro-switch 1000, which represents an example of an apparatus that utilizes pneumatic actuators as micromachines according to yet another embodiment of the present invention. Micro-switch 1000 includes a pneumatic actuator array including a housing 1010 and an elastomeric membrane 1020, a mirror platform 1050 mounted on elastomeric membrane 1020, and two or more optical fibers 1060 fixedly mounted over mirror platform 1050. Similar to the arrays described above, the pneumatic actuator array 1001 includes four actuators 1001-1 through 1001-4 arranged in a square or diamond pattern, each actuator controlling a portion 1021 of elastomeric membrane 1020 to form distended domes that selectively displace mirror platform 1050 relative to base 1010 in the manner

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described with reference to the various embodiments set forth above. Mirror platform 1010 includes a mirror 1055 that is located below the ends of optical fibers 1060 such that light emitted by one or more optical fibers is reflected from mirror 1055 to corresponding optic fibers as set forth in the example provided below with reference to FIGS. 11(A) and 11(B). Micro-switch 1000 also utilizes a control circuit (not shown) that facilitates the operations set forth in the following example using known techniques.

FIGS. 11(A) and 11(B) are simplified front elevation views showing an example of the operation of micro-switch 1000. Referring to FIG. 11(A), when actuators 1001-1 and 1001-2 are turned off and actuators 1001-3 and 1001-4 are turned on, the distended elastomeric material located over actuators 1001-3 and 1001-4 lifts the right side of mirror platform 1050, causing mirror 1055 to rotate (tilt) counter-clockwise around the Y-axis. In this first tilted position, mirror 1055 reflects light transmitted through a first optical fiber 1060(1) from, for example, an optical input device (not shown), to a second optical fiber 1060(2) that is connected to an optical output device (not shown). FIG. 11(B) shows a second switching position that occurs when actuators 1001-1 and 1001-2 are turned on and actuators 1001-3 and 1001-4 are turned off, thereby causing the distended elastomeric material located over actuators 1001-1 and 1001-2 to lift the right side of mirror platform 1050, causing mirror 1055 to rotate (tilt) clockwise around the Y-axis. In this second tilted position, mirror 1055 reflects light transmitted through an optical fiber 1060(1) to a third optical fiber 1060(3) that is connected to yet another optical output device (not shown). Those skilled in the art will recognize that actuators 1001-1 through 1001-4 can be similarly operated to cause mirror 1055 to tilt around the X-axis (see FIG. 1).

Although the present invention has been described with respect to certain specific embodiments, it will be clear to those skilled in the art that the inventive features of the present invention are applicable to other embodiments as well, all of which are intended to fall within the scope of the present invention. For example, according to one possible alternative embodiment, a pneumatic actuator formed in accordance with the structure described above can be operated in reverse such that membrane is drawn inside the cavity, rather than pushed away from the housing. In particular, as depicted in FIGS. 12(A) and 12(B), an actuator 1200 is arranged such that the pressure P1 maintained in passage 115 is substantially equal to the atmospheric pressure such that membrane 120 flattens when flap valve 130 is opened, and the pressure P2 maintained in passage 115 is lower than P1 such that membrane 120 is drawn into chamber 125 (i.e., assumes a concave instead of convex shape) when flap valve 140 is opened. Note that, for convenience, the phrase "expandable chamber" is defined herein to include the inward distention depicted in FIG. 12(B). This arrangement could be useful, for example, in digital offset lithography for large format signage because in such applications the pixel size would be larger than that needed for high-resolution document printing. In other possible embodiments, the fluid transmitted in the pneumatic actuators can be a liquid instead of a gas. Corrosive or electrically interfering fluids, moreover, can be isolated from the switching mechanism using a valve system similar to that described above with reference to FIG. 9. Furthermore, the elastic membrane can be designed with integrated constraints, such as woven fibers, such that a maximum distention length is fixed at a predetermined value and is independent of variations in pressure above a related threshold value.

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What is claimed is:

1. A pneumatic actuator comprising:

a housing having an upper wall and defining a cavity having an inner wall;

an elastomeric membrane mounted on the upper wall over the cavity such that the inner wall and the elastomeric membrane form an expandable chamber;

a first electrostatic flap valve mounted inside the expandable chamber such that the first electrostatic flap valve selectively blocks a first orifice in response to a first control signal; and

a second electrostatic flap valve mounted outside the chamber such that the second electrostatic flap valve selectively blocks a second orifice in response to a second control signal,

wherein one of said first and second orifices communicates between the expandable chamber and a pressure source, and

wherein the other of the first and second orifices communicates with a vent hole defined in the upper wall.

2. The pneumatic actuator according to claim 1, further comprising means for controlling the first and second electrostatic flap valves such that the first electrostatic flap valve is actuated to block the first orifice only when an internal pressure of the chamber is equal to a first pressure supplied to the first orifice, and such that the second electrostatic flap valve is actuated to block the second orifice only when the internal pressure of the chamber is equal to an atmospheric pressure outside of the housing.

3. The pneumatic actuator according to claim 1, wherein the elastomeric membrane comprises a silicone film.

4. The pneumatic actuator according to claim 1, wherein the housing further defines a first passage connected between the first orifice and a first pressure source, and a second passage connected between the second orifice and a second pressure source.

5. The pneumatic actuator according to claim 4, wherein the second pressure source comprises an atmospheric region located outside of the expandable chamber.

6. The pneumatic actuator according to claim 1, wherein the housing comprises a printed circuit board.

7. The pneumatic actuator according to claim 1, further comprising means for limiting a maximum distension length of the elastomeric membrane to a predetermined value.

8. An apparatus including a valve system for controlling fluid flow from a high pressure region to a low pressure region through a plurality of openings formed in a pressure wall located between the high and low pressure regions, wherein the valve system includes a pneumatic actuator array comprising:

a housing including a substrate defining a plurality of first orifices connected to a first pressure source and a plurality of second orifices connected to a second pressure source;

an elastomeric membrane mounted on the housing such that the housing and the elastomeric membrane form a plurality of expandable chambers, each expandable chamber being located over a corresponding first orifice and a corresponding second orifice, the elastomeric membrane also being positioned between the housing and the pressure wall;

a plurality of first electrostatic flap valves, each first electrostatic flap valve being mounted inside an associated expandable chamber for selectively blocking an associated first orifice in response to a first control signal; and

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a plurality of second electrostatic flap valves, each second electrostatic flap valve mounted outside the chamber for selectively blocking an associated second orifice in response to a second control signal,

wherein the plurality of expandable chambers are arranged such that a portion of the elastomeric membrane located over each expandable chamber is selectively distendable to block a corresponding opening formed in the pressure wall.

9. The apparatus according to claim 8, further comprising means for controlling the first and second electrostatic flap valves such that the first electrostatic flap valve is actuated to block the associated first orifice only when an internal pressure of the chamber is approximately equal to a first pressure supplied by the first pressure source, and such that the second electrostatic flap valve is actuated to block the second orifice only when the internal pressure of the chamber is approximately equal to a second pressure supplied by the second pressure source.

10. The apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the elastomeric membrane comprises a silicone film.

11. The apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the housing further defines a first passage connected between the first orifice and the first pressure source, and a second passage connected between the second orifice and the second pressure source.

12. The apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the plurality of second orifices communicate with the high-pressure region through associated vent holes defined in an upper wall of the housing.

13. The apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the housing comprises a printed circuit board.

14. The apparatus according to claim 8, wherein the apparatus comprises an object handling system, wherein the low-pressure region comprises an object passage, and wherein the openings in the pressure wall comprise air jets.

15. An apparatus including a pneumatic actuator array and a structure mounted on the pneumatic actuator array such that the structure is movable in accordance with an actuated state of the pneumatic actuator array, wherein the pneumatic actuator array comprises:

a housing including a wall defining a plurality of first orifices connected to a first pressure source and a plurality of second orifices connected to a second pressure source;

an elastomeric membrane mounted on the housing such that the housing and the elastomeric membrane form a plurality of expandable chambers, each expandable chamber being located over a corresponding first orifice and a corresponding second orifice, the elastomeric membrane also being positioned between the housing and the structure;

a plurality of first electrostatic flap valves, each first electrostatic flap valve being mounted inside an associated expandable chamber for selectively blocking an associated first orifice in response to a first control signal; and

a plurality of second electrostatic flap valves, each second electrostatic flap valve mounted outside the chamber for selectively blocking an associated second orifice in response to a second control signal,

wherein the plurality of expandable chambers are arranged such that a portion of the elastomeric membrane located over each expandable chamber is selectively distendable to displace a corresponding region of the structure.

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16. The apparatus according to claim **15**, further comprising means for controlling the first and second electrostatic flap valves such that the first electrostatic flap valve is actuated to block the associated first orifice only when an internal pressure of the chamber is equal to a first pressure supplied by the first pressure source, and such that the second electrostatic flap valve is actuated to block the second orifice only when the internal pressure of the chamber is equal to a second pressure supplied by the second pressure source.

17. The apparatus according to claim **15**, wherein the elastomeric membrane comprises a silicone film.

18. The apparatus according to claim **15**, wherein the housing further defines a first passage connected between the first orifice and the first pressure source, and a second

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passage connected between the second orifice and the second pressure source.

19. The apparatus according to claim **15**, wherein the plurality of second orifices communicate with an atmospheric pressure through associated vent holes defined in an upper wall of the housing.

20. The apparatus according to claim **15**, wherein the housing comprises a printed circuit board.

21. The apparatus according to claim **15**, wherein the apparatus comprises a fiber optic micro-switch, wherein the structure comprises a mirror platform, and wherein the apparatus further comprises a plurality of optical fibers fixedly mounted over mirror platform.

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